

War vs Peace: Colombia, Venezuela and the FARC Hostage Saga

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On February 4 a series of massive ostensibly “non-political” “peace” demonstrations against the left-wing guerrilla group the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) took place in Colombia. Hundreds of thousands took part under the banner of “No more FARC, No more kidnappings.” Protests also took place around the world.

However, as a February 3 statement by the British-based Colombia Solidarity Campaign (CSC) argued, despite the portrayal of these demonstrations as the “spontaneous” and “independent” initiative of ordinary citizens, they were in reality part of an “orchestrated campaign to manipulate international opinion away from backing a negotiated, humanitarian agreement as the most hopeful means towards a peaceful settlement to the country’s armed conflict.”

Initially publicized on internet networking site Facebook, the demonstrations, in which right-wing paramilitary leaders featured prominently, were heavily promoted and funded by the Colombian state apparatus and big business.

All major radio, television and newspaper outlets in Colombia provided free advertising in the days leading up to the rally. The Colombian stock exchange was also closed, bosses pressured workers to attend and the government shut down schools and public services for the rally.

These measures were aimed at mobilizing the greatest possible support for right-wing Colombian President, Alvaro Uribe (the United States’ staunchest ally in the region) and his policy of perpetuating Colombia’s decades-long civil war.

Blocking peace

The anti-FARC demonstrations took place in the context of growing conflict between Venezuela and Colombia following following Uribe’s surprise invitation in August last year to Venezuela’s left-wing President Hugo Chavez to mediate in the armed conflict, in the first place to negotiate an exchange of 47 FARC-held prisoners for 500 FARC fighters in currently in prison.

Even though, under US pressure, Uribe terminated Chavez’s role in November (on the

pretext of a supposed violation of diplomatic protocol), Chavez, together with the families of the FARC-held prisoners and Colombian Senator Piedad Cordoba, was able to facilitate the release of two FARC-held prisoners, Senator Consuelo González and Clara Rojas, on January 10.

This was the first unilateral prisoner release by the FARC in years and sparked hope that a humanitarian accord, and ultimately an end to decades of war, was possible. To this end, Chavez called for the FARC to be removed from the US and EU's international list of terrorist organizations and be granted "belligerent status." The effect of this would be twofold: Chavez argued, firstly it would require the guerrillas to renounce policies such as hostage taking and abide by human rights provisions in the Geneva protocols and secondly it would provide the framework for a political solution to the conflict and the reintegration of the FARC into Colombian society.

However, Colombian elites backed by the US (which supplies the Colombian government with US\$600 million in military aid annually) are worried at what the prospect of a peaceful solution to the conflict (which would remove the pretext for current US military intervention and require the dismantling of at least the worst aspects of the repressive apparatus of the Colombian state, including the state-backed paramilitaries), would mean for "institutional stability".

The US and Colombian elite are also concerned at the impact of the Bolivarian revolution as the process of radical change led by Chavez in Venezuela is known inside Colombia, with many of the long-suffering poor looking favorably on the revolution's social gains.

For these reasons, Uribe has responded to growing hopes for peace by launching a major political offensive against Chavez and the FARC.

Uribe claimed that Chavez's call to remove the FARC from terror lists constituted "interference" in Colombia's internal affairs and embarked on a major diplomatic offensive touring Madrid, Paris, and Geneva, and speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos to shore up support for Colombia's war stance towards the FARC in the name of fighting the "war on terror."

Within the space of one week, three high level US officials - Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy John Walters, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice - visited Colombia, where they made a series of attacks on Venezuela.

The officials alleged that Venezuela had become a key transit route for Colombia's cocaine production, which accounts for 60% of world supplies. They also alleged that Venezuela is supplying material support and weapons to the FARC; that the FARC operate in Venezuelan territory and hold prisoners there, and that Venezuela constitutes a military threat to Colombia and has expansionist aims in the region.

However, no evidence has been provided to back up any of these claims, none of which stand up to scrutiny of the facts. The allegations are in reality aimed at generating a matrix of negative international opinion in order to isolate the Chavez government whose Bolivarian revolution is posing a serious challenge to U.S. imperialism in the region.

This media and diplomatic campaign has been combined with the launching of a general

military offensive against the FARC guerillas which control around 30% of Colombian territory.

Orders were given on January 26 to encircle FARC camps where prisoners are held in order to carry out a military rescue (in direct contradiction to the wishes of the relatives of the prisoners) and to attempt to engage FARC guerrillas in combat. On the day of the so-called peace rally, Uribe called for the complete eradication of the FARC from Colombian soil.

Roots of the conflict

Colombia's guerrilla war dates back six decades, to La Violencia (The Violence) the 10-year civil war that began in the late 1940s between the Conservative and Liberal parties of the Colombian oligarchy that resulted in at least 200,000 deaths.

Many workers and peasants fled the violence, creating independent "peace communities" in the south of the country. When the government persecuted these communities, guerrilla organizations were formed as instruments of self-defense. Out of these groups, the FARC formed in 1964, and today, together with the National Liberation Army (ELN), Colombia's second largest guerrilla group, control almost 40% of the country.

The FARC has previously attempted to reach a peace accord with the Colombian government in the 1980s. However, after they disarmed and established a civilian organization, 3,000 of their members were massacred by the military, forcing them back into armed struggle. The FARC were placed on the US's list of banned terrorist organizations after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US.

The campaign against the FARC and the Venezuelan government also seeks to distract attention from the growing "para-politics" scandal that has engulfed the Uribe government, with 40 pro-Uribe legislators under investigation for their connections to the paramilitary groups, including Uribe's brother and cousin.

Uribe is also seeking to use the conflict as an excuse to crackdown on internal dissent. The Colombia Solidarity Campaign statement reported that in the previous two weeks, dozens of activists have been arbitrarily arrested and detained. Senator Piedad Cordoba, who is now under investigation for "crimes against the homeland," has been the victim of numerous death threats and verbal assaults attacks publicly justified by Colombian Interior Minister, Carlos Holguin in Colombian daily El Tiempo on January 24 when he said, "when a person speaks against their country, as Senator Piedad Cordoba did, it is natural that people will react."

Leader of the center-left opposition party, Polo Democratico Alternativo, Carlos Gaviria, also received death threats for organizing a separate march on the same day as the pro-war demonstrations in order to call for a humanitarian accord. Gaviria described the political environment as "pre-fascist."

Divisions

However, the pro-war "peace" demonstrations dominated by Colombia's wealthy classes revealed deep divisions within Colombian society. Many sectors criticized the marches for failing to condemn the violence and kidnappings by right-wing paramilitaries, as well the violence carried out by the Colombian state itself. Colombia has the highest rate of killings

of trade unionists in the world.

In a country where 49% of people live in poverty and only one in four can afford access to the internet, Maria Jimena Duzan, a columnist for the Colombian daily El Tiempo, pointed out that it is unlikely “that the victims of the paramilitaries,” who tend to be impoverished peasants, “have their own select club on Facebook.”

While leaders of right-wing paramilitary death squads participated in the march, the families of FARC-held prisoners refused, claiming the protests “promoted hate.” Astrid Betancourt, the sister of Ingrid Betancourt who is currently held by the FARC, accused Uribe of “manipulating the pain of the families.”

Deyanira Ortiz, whose husband has been held by the FARC for six years, said the protests were “not for the freedom of the hostages but against the FARC. And that doesn’t serve any purpose.”

While the families of the prisoners have repeatedly called for the reinstatement of Chavez as a mediator, the anti-FARC demonstrations featured significant anti-Chavez and anti-Venezuelan sentiment. Many marchers carried placards reading “Chavez go home” and “No to communism, no to Chavez, no to the FARC.”

As Uribe was ratcheting up the war drive, the FARC announced on February 2 that it would unilaterally release a second round of prisoners, ex-congress members, Gloria Polanco de Losada, Luis Eladio Perez, and Orlando Beltrán Cuéllar, to the Venezuelan government, as a gesture of “recognition for the persistent efforts to achieve a humanitarian accord” by Chavez and Cordoba.

Venezuela has confirmed it will facilitate the hostage release, and the Colombian government has said thus far it will not impede the operation.

However, tensions between the two countries remain high. Colombian paramilitary groups continue to operate with impunity in the border region, and Chavez has warned of a potential US proxy war against Venezuela via a Colombian invasion. He says he has received intelligence from Brazil and Argentina to indicate this.

Although Chavez has repeatedly stressed that Venezuela seeks a peaceful resolution to the conflict in neighbouring Colombia, which has often spilt over the border and caused millions of refugees to flee to Venezuela, he has also made it clear that Venezuela will defend itself from any attack.

If Colombia invaded Venezuela, “they would regret it for 100 years,” Chavez said during a televised speech on February 2. “Don’t even think about it, Colombian oligarchs, you would run into the soldiers of Bolivar.”

In the immediate term, the strategy of the US appears to be continued provocation aimed at raising tensions between the two countries, coupled with a renewed diplomatic onslaught to isolate Venezuela.

In the context of the continental rebellion against US domination and neoliberalism, Uribe, referred to by Chavez as a “sad pawn” of the US, has become a symbol of the imperialist policies of Washington in Latin America. However, the fate of FARC-held prisoners and prospects for peace in Colombia are in large part connected to the Bolivarian revolution and

its struggle for a genuine and just peace in the region.

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